Guest Contribution

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Surviving the Information Age

by Jim Carroll

With the exploding growth of the Internet in the last several years, I'm sure that there are many Nova Scotia CAs who are surfing the Web. And there might be a few who recognize my name – I'm the author of the national bestselling book, the Canadian Internet Handbook, as well as a regular media commentator, columnist and keynote speaker.

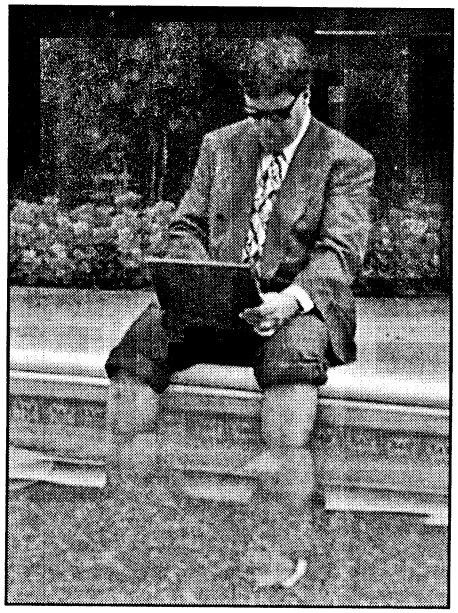
Yet I'm not sure how many might be aware that I'm a CA, a native of Halifax, and in fact, still a member of the Nova Scotia Institute of CAs.

I qualified as a CA in 1981 while working with Thorne Riddell – a predecessor to KPMG — out of the Joseph Howe Building in downtown Halifax. Today, I live and work in Mississauga Ontario, and have authored some 23 books about the Internet that have sold in excess of a half a million copies. With that type of publishing success, I live a rather unexpected, and one might say weird, life.

I often wonder how I got here....

From my perspective, it began in 1982 in Halifax when I sat down for the first time at a personal computer and dialed into a computer bulletin board. A brand new CA with Thorne Riddell, I had just ended a relationship with a high school "sweetheart," and needed something to do with my time. The office had just brought in a new, state of the art computer. I remember it well – it was a Radio Shack Model III computer, a machine that featured 64k of memory, one disk drive, and a 300 baud modem. Completely primitive by today's standards, but on the leading edge at the time.

The first wave of personal computer technology was just beginning to be felt in the corporate sector back then. I was curious as to what it was all about, and so late one night alone in the office, I figured out how to send an e-mail message. For some strange reason, that was it – I was hooked.



Self described author, columnist and nice guy, Jim Carroll enjoys the advantages of working from home. "All I need is a waterproof PC and I've got it made."

And that was, I suppose, the beginning of a long voyage that led to my rather peculiar situation today, in which I no longer practice accounting, but instead, write books and articles, speak at high profile meetings, deal with the media, and generally have become a bit of a "Internet guru," all from my home office in Mississauga, Ontario.

From that point back in 1982, I found myself being drawn further and further into this strange new world of electronic mail and online information services, and away from mainstream accounting. I remember that many of my fellow CAs at Thorne Riddell thought I was crazy for focussing on this technology world. I remember one partner in particular admonishing me that I was throwing away a useful career, and that I would come to regret it. But I was convinced that there was something big happening here – and I couldn't draw myself away.

In 1985, my technology work was noticed to such a degree within Thorne Riddell that I was offered the opportunity to work in the national office in Toronto, with the goal of helping to get the firm up and running with a national communications network. I signed on, with the intent of returning to Halifax two years later.

Of course, by 1987, the firm had merged with Ernst & Whinney, and the opportunity presented itself to take the communication system we had developed to the world. I leapt at the opportunity for world travel, and abandoned plans to return to Halifax. The next two years were a whirlwind of activity, as I found myself travelling regularly to Ernst offices in London, Brussels, Paris, Washington and New York.

My goal? I was convinced that we could change the very nature of the firm by providing for global e-mail, knowledge and resource sharing, and by building a database of our global professional skills. Looking back, I suppose my ideas were all too radical at the time. Yet surprisingly, most accounting firms today talk of the need to capture and preserve their intellectual capital.

I was on the right track, but simply ten years ahead of my time.

In 1990, I decided to step out and establish my own consulting firm, with the objective of assisting organizations in taking strategic advantage of technologies such as e-mail and the emerging Internet. It was a pretty brave thing to do, given that a recession was just starting. Yet I enjoyed instant and rewarding success, no doubt given the fact that with a zillion technology consultants about, senior management was pleading for someone not simply with technical experience but business sense – a technology smart CA.

Of course, everything changed when my first book, the 1994 Canadian Internet Handbook, took off

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a few years later my co-author Rick Broadhead and I were as surprised as anyone when it rocketed to the #1 position in the Financial Post, Toronto Star, Montreal Gazette and many other publications. Suddenly, I had become a bit of a celebrity. The first time someone asked me for an autograph, I thought to myself, "this is a really strange experience…."

Since then, I've written scads of books about the Internet and the impact of a wired economy on the way we work and play. I often find myself in front of a television camera, having appeared on CNN, The National on CBC and countless other shows, or quoted in newspapers and magazines right across the country. I've had people come up to me on the street to say hello – a very disconcerting thing.

That first book turned into an industry for me, such that today my revenue comes primarily from book royalties and speaking engagements. I'm represented by a couple of speakers bureaus who act as agents, and find it quite strange to see myself listed in their catalogs next to folks such as Pamela Wallin, Allen Fotheringham, George Bush, Ed McMahon, Hugh Downs and Bryant Gumbel. I travel North America extensively, appearing as a keynote speaker or seminar leader for all kinds of conferences, meetings and corporate events.

I also live what is, I suppose, a very unique lifestyle. When things got busy, I needed help, and so my wife Christa, who is also a Chartered Accountant, quit her job as the Financial Comptroller of a large packaged goods company in order to help out. Today, we work out of a completely wired home that features a high speed local area network that extends to every room in the house, with up to six computers linked in at any one time. A high speed connection to the Internet, three phone lines, and other communication tools plug me into the world. All I need is a waterproof PC and I've got it made.

A home office is a fabulous place to work – I can quit at 5 o'clock and play with my two young children and not have to worry about being stuck in a traffic jam.

I've still got a lot of family in Nova Scotia, and so we voyage down at least twice a year, often around speaking engagements in the province. When I do, I often encounter friends from my days in the CA profession in Halifax, who now tell me that I was right in my decision in 1982 to focus on the technology world.

Throughout the whole experience, I've managed to maintain my humility, knowing that there was certainly a huge element of luck in having released a book about the Internet just as the topic began to explode. Having said that, I am also convinced that my background as a CA, which gives you the ability to deal with all kinds of unique situations, has been crucial to my success. ✧